

**Prisons &
Probation**

Ombudsman
Independent Investigations

Independent investigation into the death of Ms Emma Muirhead, on 13 September 2024 following her release from HMP Styal

A report by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

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OUR VISION

To deliver high quality and timely independent investigations and work closely with partners to achieve tangible benefits for the safety and confidence of those in custody and under community supervision.

WHAT WE DO



WHAT WE VALUE



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Summary

1. The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman aims to make a significant contribution to safer, fairer custody and community supervision. One of the most important ways in which we work towards that aim is by carrying out independent investigations into deaths, due to any cause, of prisoners, young people in detention, residents of approved premises and detainees in immigration centres.
2. If my office is to best assist His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in ensuring the standard of care received by those within service remit is appropriate, our recommendations should be focused, evidenced and viable. This is especially the case if there is evidence of systemic failure.
3. Since 6 September 2021, the PPO has investigated post-release deaths that occur within 14 days of the person's release from prison.
4. Ms Emma Muirhead died from multiple drug toxicity on 13 September 2024, following her release from HMP Styal on 30 August 2024. She was 48 years old. We offer our condolences to those who knew her.
5. Ms Muirhead had a long history of drug use and engaged with DART (Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team) at HMP Styal. She was conscious that the continued drug use was taking a toll on her both physically and mentally and she was eager to engage with the drug and alcohol service in the community. We did not identify any significant learning relating to the pre-release planning or post-release supervision.
6. We make no recommendations.

The Investigation Process

7. HMPPS notified us of Ms Muirhead's death on 13 September 2024.
8. The PPO investigator obtained copies of relevant extracts from Ms Muirhead's prison and probation records.
9. We informed HM Coroner for Warrington of the investigation. She gave us the results of the post-mortem examination. We have sent the Coroner a copy of this report.
10. The Ombudsman's office contacted Ms Muirhead's mother to explain the investigation and to ask if she had any matters she wanted us to consider. She did not have any questions but asked for a copy of our report.
11. The initial report was shared with HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). HMPPS did not find any factual inaccuracies.
12. Ms Muirhead's family received a copy of the initial report. They did not make any comments.

Background Information

HMP Styal

13. HMP Styal is a closed prison which holds convicted and remanded female prisoners. It is managed by HMPPS. Spectrum Community Health CIC provides substance misuse services.

Probation Service

14. The Probation Service works with all individuals subject to custodial and community sentences. During a person's imprisonment, they oversee their sentence plan to assist in rehabilitation, prepare reports to advise the Parole Board and have links with local partnerships to which they refer people for resettlement services, where appropriate. Post-release, the Probation Service supervises people throughout their licence period and post-sentence supervision.

Key Events

Background

15. On 11 October 2023, Ms Emma Muirhead was arrested for drug offences but was released on police bail with bail conditions, which included a curfew and an electric monitoring tag.
16. On 29 July 2024, Ms Muirhead was remanded to HMP Styal after she pleaded guilty to charges of possession with intent to supply.
17. That day, a GP at the prison, completed Ms Muirhead's initial health screen and a urine sample tested positive for methadone, opiates, benzodiazepine and cocaine. Ms Muirhead started a methadone detoxification programme.
18. On 31 July, a worker from the Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team (DART) completed a triage assessment with Ms Muirhead. She said she used £100 of heroin and crack cocaine every week. Ms Muirhead was diagnosed with crack lung (an acute pulmonary syndrome caused by smoking crack cocaine) because she had used crack cocaine from a young age.

Pre-release planning

19. On 13 August, a worker from DART visited Ms Muirhead to discuss her treatment plan but Ms Muirhead asked her to come back after her court date which was scheduled for 30 August. Ms Muirhead told her she planned to reduce her methadone and move to a Buvidal injection (used to treat opiate dependence) instead.
20. On 20 August, DART sent an alert to Change, Grow, Live, Manchester (CGL - a drug and alcohol service) and requested an appointment in preparation for Ms Muirhead's court hearing and in case she was released directly from court.
21. On 22 August, CGL gave Ms Muirhead an appointment for 30 August. A worker from the DART team provided Ms Muirhead with the appointment information along with the contact details of a recovery co-ordinator at CGL in case she had any delays being released from court. They also provided harm minimisation and lowered tolerance information and advice. Ms Muirhead said that she had a good understanding of this because she had engaged with the community drug and alcohol team before. She declined a naloxone (reduces the effects of an opiate overdose) kit and said that she had no plans to use drugs.
22. On 29 August, a worker from the DART team sent Ms Muirhead's prescribing information to CGL, Manchester, in preparation for her potential release.
23. On 30 August, Ms Muirhead was charged with possession of drugs with intent to supply and sentenced to a two-year Suspended Sentence Order (SSO). She was released from court that day. As part of her SSO, she received a 12-month Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (DRR - structured treatment and regular drug testing).

24. A worker from the DART team informed CGL that Ms Muirhead had been released from court.

Post-release management

25. Ms Muirhead was given an initial appointment with her local probation office. However, because she was released from court late, she arrived for her appointment at 4.30pm, and it was too late for her Community Offender Manager (COM) to see her. She gave Ms Muirhead another appointment for 9 September.
26. Ms Muirhead also missed her appointment with a worker at CGL. They agreed to see her on 2 September, and Ms Muirhead attended and engaged well. Ms Muirhead did not disclose whether she had been using any illicit drugs since her release from court.
27. On 9 September, Ms Muirhead attended her initial appointment with her COM and engaged well. They noted Ms Muirhead did not appear under the influence of drugs and did not present with any signs of neglect. Ms Muirhead was given her next appointment for 16 September.
28. CGL, informed her COM that Ms Muirhead had collected her methadone script on 12 September.

Circumstances of Ms Muirhead's death

29. At 5.00am on 13 September, Ms Muirhead's friend found her unresponsive and not breathing on her bed. She called 999 and the paramedics arrived at 5.11am. They reported Ms Muirhead was cold to touch and visible signs of rigor mortis were present. At 5.15am, the paramedics confirmed that Ms Muirhead had died.

Post-mortem report

30. The post-mortem report concluded that Ms Muirhead died from multiple drug toxicity. The toxicology report showed Ms Muirhead had methadone, morphine and cocaine in her system at the time of her death.

Inquest

31. At the inquest held on 29 April 2025, the coroner concluded Ms Muirhead's death was drug-related.

Findings

Substance misuse service

32. Ms Muirhead had a history of substance use. While she was in prison, she was promptly referred to substance misuse services and was appropriately supported to manage her substance use issues. The substance misuse team saw her regularly and she was advised on harm minimisation and lowered tolerance levels.
33. The substance misuse service at Styal is responsible for identifying prisoners at risk from opiate overdose. These prisoners should be offered a supply of naloxone upon their release from prison, and they should be trained in its use. Ms Muirhead was correctly identified and offered a naloxone kit, however she declined.
34. The substance misuse team ensured Ms Muirhead would receive support upon release and appropriately referred her to the community drug and alcohol team. An appointment was arranged for her, and her methadone prescription was sent to the community pharmacy in preparation for her release. There was evidence of good collaboration between the drug and alcohol service at Styal and CGL Manchester.
35. We are satisfied that both the prison and probation services did all they could to manage the risks associated with her substance misuse.
36. We make no recommendations.

Adrian Usher
Prisons and Probation Ombudsman

December 2025

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